

"BEAUTY IS

Strip and Auger Mining have become the current issue for those high-minded heroes who crave and court the attention of the moneyed and the great. Politicians, bored with themselves, use this simple issue to create noise by which to make popular but meaningless speeches. Mining is not a political issue at its heart. Nor, is it basically a social issue. It is economical. It has to do with dollars and employment.

Today, it is popular to decry the rape of the natural resources, to bemoan polluted streams and air. That makes good stump talk! The ugly fact is that strip mining has become the "whipping-boy" for those reformers who find it easy to point out the faults on the other end of the state, and over-look the ugly mess in their own yard and fishing hole. Strip mining is absolutely necessary to the present economy of Southeastern Kentucky if we are to hold our own as people who believe that work is better than welfare.

It is time that everyone looks at the simple fact that no one understands the situation in Southeastern Kentucky better than those who grew up in the shadows of our beautiful mountains. We have sought ways to survive by taking pick and shovel, carbide light and buggy, and crawling on bended knee, we entered narrow caverns to feed our children and clothe them against the nasty, blowing winds of winter. We think it unbelievable that total strangers raised in marble-walled mansions should now attempt to steal from our hands these tools of survival. More unthinkable still is the fact that those who take from our hands the tools of survival will curse and cry because their taxes are rising and welfare is on the increase. We, more than they, hate the notion of being unemployed; we, more than they, understand the danger of welfarism; we, more than they, know the waning inner self-respect and loss of dignity. Why not? We have been stripped of the tools of our trade and left unable to perform the tasks of manhood.

The alternative which comes to surface from the confluence of these two polluted streams is starvation. If welfare is out, and work is impossible, then, starvation is inevitable. These high-minded bird watchers can stand in the splendor of our beautiful mountains while we stand in the soup-line in some strange city. Such is unthinkable to those of us who have discovered that the beauty of our hills is as much in their bellies as on their lofty peaks... BEAUTY IS SOMETIMES A BISCUIT!

A BISCUIT"

The real issue is local - one of hungry babies, crying mothers, and of workless, payless fathers who wait for a welfare check, food stamps or by chance, a handout. Exploited by those who would shackle our families to poverty under guise of concern for beauty, they would move us like pawns on a chessboard for political gain or favor while we wait in the shadows of beauty, hungry and alone until the opportune moment when our situation and need will pay rich political dividends.

It is popular and proper for our state and federal leadership to talk of the strides of progress in recent years. However, to downgrade or destroy the mining industry in Southeastern Kentucky will reverse the trend to such a degree that thousands will be jobless and homeless. Our young people already run to cities in search of work! Where shall we all run? Is it not proper, indeed, to ask who will be left to pay the taxes to support us all?

It has become commonplace to argue that the Federal government is too far removed to adequately discern the State's problems of accurately meet the state's needs. How much more is it impossible for either the state or Federal governments to correctly assess the needs of Eastern Kentucky. It is the belief of the indigenous populace of our area that they who have lived here and survived here know better than any the nature of their needs. They feel it unjust for outside authorities to superimpose far-reaching solutions upon problems obviously misunderstood. Judged by the standards of other peoples in other places, we here are unique and even peculiar. Our greatest desire is to be self-sufficient, self-respecting citizens whose children have respect for their parents. To close the one remaining door to self-determination will still the current of progress and reduce our economy to a stagnant cesspool of welfareism.

Picture, if you will; the many thousands of men engaged in Strip, Auger, and deep mining. Most of them have families with children in school. Fathers work hard and pay their bills. Now, take away their jobs, sterilize their pride, call back their self-respect, erase the smile from the faces of their children. Such would be the unthinkable result should mining be stopped! Where now is beauty when a black shroud of fate reduces their homes to shanties and shacks, their children to orphans, or, worse, wards of the state? To which good do we aspire?

BEAUTY IS A BISCUIT

FOOD AND POWER IN THE COALFIELDS

by Lora Smith

IN FEBRUARY OF 1970, a full-page paid advertisement appeared in newspapers across Eastern Kentucky. “Beauty is a Biscuit,” declared the headline. A visceral and angry litany followed, aimed against politicians and “high minded birdwatchers” who showed concern over the environmental damage caused by strip-mining.

The rhetoric was terrifying. If the mining industry were to fail, dependence, starvation, and mass exodus would follow in the Eastern Kentucky mountains. At its crescendo, the manifesto argued that real beauty lay in mining coal from the bellies of the mountains—and specifically, in the food that mining put in the bellies of local people.

The names of two companies—Oxygen Inc. and the Delaware Powder Co.—claimed the largest text block on the bottom of the page. Based in Pineville, Kentucky, Oxygen and Delaware Powder were local employers that manufactured explosives for strip-mining operations. (In strip-mining, part of a mountain is blown up to expose a subterranean coal seam.)

The campaign responded to a contentious moment in Kentucky’s history, when the coal industry confronted local resistance. Much of the tension arose from the so-called broad form deeds that coal companies used, assuming ownership of the minerals below a property’s surface. According to the language of these deeds, individual landownership covered only the “surface and air” of a piece of land—not the valuable minerals underneath. Once strip-mined, the landowner’s entire property was destroyed.

DEE DAVIS, president of the Center for Rural Strategies in Whitesburg, Kentucky, was a teenager in Hazard at the time. He remembers seeing the ad in his local paper. “It was an unsettling time—people were angry,” Davis says. “Large-scale strip mines were coming, and it was a big public fight. The people that were powerless were often the landowners.”

While federal regulation of strip-mining had taken hold in the 1960s and would continue through the 1970s, Davis says the anger wasn’t aimed at the federal government. “They were really talking about people in Louisville and Lexington. The coal operators were creating a cultural battle, trying to make people here feel disrespected by some imaginary city elite that wanted to keep the mountains beautiful and didn’t care if that meant someone starved to death.”

The length of the ad was part of its brilliance. The cramped page of varied-sized text demanded intense engagement. “If you gave it the time to read the whole thing, go through the author’s whole logical process, you were going to be changed by it,” Davis says.

We, the undersigned, acknowledge a vested interest in the future of Southeastern Kentucky and we believe that we speak for thousands who will refuse to bow the knee to the expedient, and will continue to battle with all comers who would relegate us to a life of poverty. We invite the comments of any and all.

Calvin C. Hays and T. R. Hays

OXYGEN INC.

DELAWARE

POWDER CO.

People who had the time to read the paper were the primary target audience. “It was intended for the Appalachian middle class,” says Davis. “People who lived in town—shop owners, professionals, business people with political influence.” These were the people whose pocketbooks would be hit if coal workers lost wages or moved away.

A BISCUIT SITS AT THE CENTER of both a real and imagined class struggle. Biscuits have long been signifiers of class in the mountains. The “beaten biscuit crusade,” a movement by teachers at the Hindman Settlement School in Knott County, Kentucky, tried to convince mountain women to replace cornbread with the more expensive and labor-intensive beaten biscuit. This history begs the question of why the advertisement’s authors didn’t choose cornbread, the traditional bread of the people, over the biscuit.

The potential absence of the biscuit is what matters. The text read, “The real issue is local- one of hungry babies, crying mothers, and of workless, payless fathers who wait for a welfare check, food stamps or by chance, a handout...” The campaign encouraged local middle class and working poor to unite against much wealthier “outsiders” supposedly trying to starve them out.

The absence of food in some Appalachian coalfield communities, and the causes of that absence, are as worthy of research as the roots of shucky beans and sour corn. Government commodity foods, processed foods distributed by relief agencies, and changes to national food policies deserve future study.

Likewise, environmental issues, including the loss of access to topsoil and potable water from mountaintop removal, have profoundly affected foodways. Without clean water, we can’t drink or cook safely. Without our topsoil for growing food, we can’t eat.

The struggle over land use in Appalachia is not as simple as the Beauty is a Biscuit campaign suggested. It is not a choice between a biscuit for hard-working local people or a beautiful landscape for the big-city bird watchers.

Nor is the issue exclusively local. Coal- and gas-rich communities in Eastern Kentucky provide families across the country the energy to fry chicken, braise greens, and bake pies. Many of the headwaters

originating in the Appalachians feed the greater waterways of the Southeast, including the Mississippi River. Our plates are all connected back to the soil and water of the mountains. Ignoring the connection means depriving ourselves of the richness of an interconnected Southern ecosystem.

TODAY ONLY 7,000 MEN AND WOMEN WORK mining jobs in Kentucky. While external factors—diminishing coal resources, competition from natural gas—drive most of the decline in production, industry PR is still creating villains out of regulators and imagined elites. The industry-driven “Friends of Coal” campaign has been successful, positioning locals against strangers who are presumably not “friends” with coal and coal miners.

Food remains a talking point. It’s no longer a symbol of hunger—instead, food is positioned as an economic opportunity by farmers, chefs, advocates, and consumers. Grow Appalachia provides grants and technical support for planting gardens. Mike Lewis, an Eastern Kentucky farmer, connects returning veterans to agricultural careers through the Growing Warriors program. Members of Community Farm Alliance and other non-profits advocate for policies that build a local food economy. Farmers’ markets are springing up in small mountain towns, creating new jobs and making healthy food accessible.

We now have the chance to re-imagine a mountain table where no one goes hungry, a table set for a new sustainable era in which soil and water are our greatest natural resources. A table piled high with locally grown food. A table where our biscuits get buttered on both sides.

That would be a beautiful biscuit. A biscuit worth fighting for. 🍪

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NEWSPAPER ADVERTISEMENT, PAGES 24–25, 27, “Beauty is a Biscuit,” portions reprinted from the Middlesboro Daily News, February 19, 1970.